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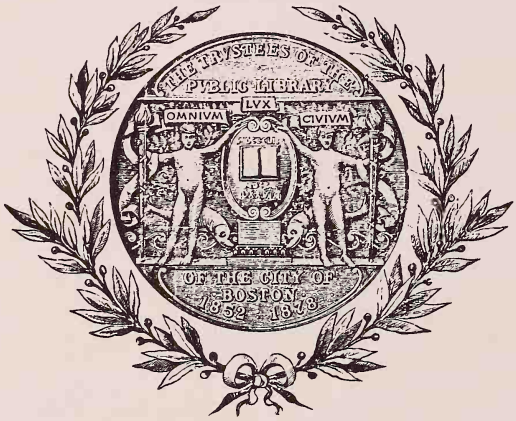
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# A History of the Watson Family *Eminent in Northampton* 1860-1948

by

MYRA M. SAMPSON

*A History of the Watson Family*

*Watson family 1864 in Europe*

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# Author's Foreword

This account has been prepared because of the bequests of the Misses Julia and Rosa Watson to the Forbes Library of Northampton. These library benefactors were the daughters of Henry Watson, Jr., who moved to Northampton in 1860; and the sisters of Arthur Watson, who was President of the Forbes Library Board of Trustees from 1896–1922.

Their bequests include the principal of two Trust Funds which terminated with the death of their niece, Cecile Watson in 1966.

# Acknowledgment

Miss Myra M. Sampson, Professor emeritus of Biology at Smith College, originally presented her researches on the Watson family at a meeting of the Northampton Historical Society.

In response to widespread interest she has expanded her talk in this permanent form. The Trustees express their formal thanks to Miss Sampson.

# A History of the Watson Family

Henry Watson, Jr., one of the thirteen children of Henry Watson, Sr. and his wife Julia Reed Watson, was born in East Windsor Hills, Connecticut in 1810. He was a descendant of Robert Watson, a first settler, and the grandson of John Watson, who graduated from Yale University in 1764. His grandfather and father were successful merchants who retired to engage in farming. During his boyhood he assisted on the family farm and attended the local schools. He graduated from Washington (now Trinity) College in Hartford in 1828, studied for a year at Harvard, and in 1829–1830 read law in Hartford.

In the fall of 1830 he was advised to go to a warmer climate because of after effects of a cold contracted in the preceding winter. This and an inquiry for a schoolmaster from Greensboro in the cotton belt of central Alabama led him to leave for this community in November. Disappointed that the position had been filled, that a small school started by him was not a success, and that the University of Alabama could not afford additional faculty, he returned home in 1831. This turned out to be a fortunate outcome, because he then completed his law studies with Hungerford and Cone in Hartford, and was admitted to the bar in 1833.

Convinced that there was more chance of prospering in Alabama than in New England, he returned to that state immediately and passed the bar examination within a few weeks. He then engaged in law practice in Greensboro with the Honorable John Erwin and was his partner from 1834 to 1849. He retired from the profession at that time because of ill-health due to overwork.

In 1834, there was an era of speculation in land which led to a growing legal business in property transfers and rising real estate prices. Success in his profession made it possible for Mr.

Watson to invest in insurance, bank, and railroad stocks, to purchase a plantation and to fulfill his ambition of engaging in cotton planting. By 1841 he had become a successful lawyer and cotton planter, a deacon of the Episcopal Church, and one of Greensboro's leading citizens.

In 1845 he married Sophia Peck, the daughter of Frederick Peck of Greensboro. Her charm, ability and courage, and their mutual devotion are disclosed in their letters to each other in 1848. In that year the death of his father forced him to spend four months in Connecticut aiding in settling his father's estate and in planning his mother's future. Seven of his brothers had migrated to the West and the oldest at home was only twenty-three years old.

Henry was much concerned at leaving Sophy with such great responsibility, and a stream of letters gave her encouragement, advice, and instruction. From April to August she managed the Greensboro home and directed the overseer of the 900 acre plantation, nine miles distant, in the planting and in the work and welfare of its seven hundred slaves. Her great anxiety was the illness of her eight month old son, Frederick, and of slaves on the plantation. She arranged for their medical care and supplies, nursed her own son and three slaves whom she brought home from the plantation. Frederick recovered but the others did not. When Henry returned, the illness among the slaves had abated, and the crops were doing well. Sophy had managed the home and the plantation successfully during four difficult months.

In the summer of 1860, this native New Englander moved with his family from Greensboro to Northampton. His family then included his wife, his sister Harriet Watson and his six children: Frederick, Julia, Arthur, Ella, Rosa, and Walter. Mr. Watson was fifty years old, his wife thirty-nine, his sister twenty-seven. The children ranged in age from fourteen to two. The move came about because of the ill-health of Henry and his wife, the existence in Northampton of famous water cures or "Hydropathic Institutes," and the excellent preparatory school for boys, the "Collegiate Institute," which had long been at-

*Mr. Henry Watson, Jr. 1840*

*Mrs. Henry Watson, Jr. 1840*
*nee Sophia Peck*

tended by sons of Southerners. In addition the beauty of the city was no small attraction with its wide tree-lined streets, fine homes and churches, and its location in the lovely fertile Connecticut Valley rimmed by mountains.

Soon after his arrival Mr. Watson purchased (for $20,000) an estate named "Wildwood." This consisted of forty-six acres bordered by North Elm, Prospect and Massasoit Streets, the area now included in Childs Park and Woodlawn Avenue. It contained extensive woodlands and grasslands and a fine three-story gothic house built in 1855. He planned to develop the estate and to bring household furniture from Greensboro. Mrs. Watson, critically ill of tuberculosis, died in October. Then Aunt Harriet, who had spent the preceding summer with the children in Castleton, Vermont, took charge of the family.

Mr. Watson intended to spend summers in Northampton and winters in Greensboro. At this time he owned the town-house in Greensboro, a thousand acre plantation with eleven hundred slaves near Greensboro in Newbern, the summer home in Northampton, and more than $150,000 in securities. Cotton

was selling at its highest price. He estimated his annual income at more than $30,000 and the value of his total estate at approximately $325,000. Within a year his plans and his prosperity changed.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Mr. Watson, who was opposed to secession but was a slave owner, was not welcome in Greensboro nor in Northampton. His solution was to take his family to Europe in 1861 for the duration of the war. Heidelberg, Germany, was their home for two and a half years, and Caen, France, for one year. Shorter periods were spent in other parts of France and in England. The three older children continued their education in German and French schools, while the younger children were taught by Harriet, who managed the homes. According to Mr. Watson's carefully kept records, their total expenditures for the four years was about $26,000. This included household expenses of $1,700 a year, school charges of $8,000, and the costs of travel.

In the late fall of 1865, they returned to Wildwood. Mr. Watson made this the permanent family home, but he spent parts of each winter in Greensboro until he sold his plantation in 1884. He devoted himself to his children, directed their education, encouraged their interest in nature and in civic affairs, and played an active part in their home life. In 1868, he wrote that his children were "amiable, affectionate and obedient." He fostered and maintained cordial relations with relatives and friends: corresponded, visited and entertained freely. His chief occupations were the development of Wildwood, the care of his investments, and a continuing study of the social and economic life of the Old South. He enclosed Wildwood with hedges; preserved the century old trees which still exist, cultivated the meadows, planted shade and fruit trees, exotic shrubs, flower and vegetable gardens. The house was improved and a large barn erected which provided for three horses, cows, and farm and pleasure vehicles.

Obituaries in 1891 stated that "He was a man of rare intelligence with sound judgment and fine business ability; a considerate and an excellent citizen." His will named his three

*Rosa and Walter 1861*

*Ella, Rosa and Walter 1864*

sons as administrators, bequeathed legacies to his sister, Harriet, to the Greensboro Episcopal Church and Library, and left the rest of his estate in equal shares to his six children. The value of the estate, including Wildwood and stocks and bonds was more than $230,000.

A delay in carrying out the provisions of the will was unavoidable, because a severe financial depression made it inadvisable to sell either real estate or securities. Eventually the proceeds of dividends and sale of stocks and bonds were distributed to the heirs. Arthur was selected by the heirs to be the executor.

Northampton continued to be the home of four of the children: Julia, Arthur, Ella, and Rosa. Frederick moved to Selma, Alabama, in 1866, and Walter to Salem, Virginia, in 1888. Arthur and his sisters purchased Frederick's and Walter's shares of Wildwood, and with their Aunt made their home the social and intellectual center of the community. In 1909, they sold Wildwood to Frederick Jager for $40,000, who later sold it to Charles Childs. (This is now Childs Park). They bought

an estate on Pomeroy Terrace (now the Northampton School for Girls). While waiting for the house (now the Montgomery House) to be prepared for occupancy, they rented a house on Henshaw Avenue from Wilson Moog.

Aunt Harriet, who was very frail, lived until 1914. She bequeathed her estate to her nieces and nephews. Arthur lived until 1922. In 1924, the daughters sold the Pomeroy Terrace property and purchased a home at 55 Prospect Street where they lived for the rest of their lives. Their niece Cecile, who inherited it from Rosa in 1938, sold it in 1948 to Esther Carpenter and Myra M. Sampson.

Detailed information concerning the six children and their niece follows.

## Frederick Watson (1848–1906)

Frederick, the oldest child, was fourteen years old when the family moved in 1860 from Greensboro. There he had spent an enjoyable boyhood with family, schoolmates, and other friends. He lived for one year in Northampton; for the next four in Germany and France where he attended schools and traveled; and then a sixth year in Northampton.

In the fall of 1866 he returned to the South and engaged in business in an iron foundry in Selma, Alabama. In 1878 he married Mary Amelia John of Selma. Here their three children, Henry, Cecile, and Francis were born. He visited Northampton and corresponded with his father, and later with Arthur concerning his share of the estate. In 1892–93 he used what was then available to take his family to Europe. His older son, Henry, lived until 1898 and Frederick until 1906. His widow and two other children moved to Cincinnati. His widow lived until 1941. Francis married Mary Ella Strine of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. They had no children. Francis died in 1943. His widow is still living. Cecile lived until 1966. Another section of this history deals with Cecile.

*Wildwood 1892*

Julia, who was twelve years old when the family moved to Northampton, remembered well Southern plantation life and often referred to Greensboro as her old home. In later years she visited and corresponded with friends there, subscribed to the local paper, and supplied it with pre-war photographs of the community. She helped finance local enterprises. It is she who presented the letters and papers which constitute the Watson Collection now in the Duke University Library in Durham, North Carolina.

However, her greatest interest was in Northampton. On her return from Europe in 1865, she continued her education, begun in Greensboro and carried on in Germany and in France, by studying with her father and her Pastor, Dr. Hall. She assisted her Aunt and eventually managed household affairs. She played an active part in the social and intellectual life of the City, and was a member of the Edwards Congregational Church, the Northampton Historical Society, the Lathrop Home Association, and served on the Board of the District Nursing Association. In 1878, she organized the "Ladies Club," later named the "Monday Afternoon Club" which still exists. The purpose of the Club was the "Intellectual Advancement" of its members, brought about by the preparation, reading, and discussion of special topics. The title of the first topic was the "Turko-Prussian War." Julia and her sisters served several terms as President, and her niece was a member from 1942–1948.

Julia gave freely of her energy and her resources to worthwhile causes. Among these were various charities, patronage of the Academy of Music, preservation of the special advantages of the City, and protection of beautiful trees between Green Street and City Hall by protesting their removal.

She enjoyed visiting and entertaining relatives and friends and traveled in this country and abroad. According to an old friend, Professor John S. Bassett, she was an excellent racon-

*Wildwood 1892*

teur who regaled her friends by her skill in relating stories and anecdotes. She lived until 1927.

She inherited one-sixth of the estate of her father, one-eighth of that of her Aunt Harriet, and one-fourth of that of Arthur. Her will included bequests to Ella, Rosa, and Walter, and to her nephew and niece, Francis and Cecile. The remainder of her estate constituted a Trust Fund. The income of this was distributed in turn to Ella and Rosa, to Rosa, to Francis and Cecile, and to Cecile. The principal, at the termination of the Trust, following the death of Cecile in 1966, was bequeathed as follows: 84 per cent to the Forbes Library, 3 per cent each to Dickinson Hospital, the District Nursing Association, Edwards Congregational Church, the Lathrop Home, and the Greensboro Episcopal Church, and 1 per cent to the Greensboro Public Library.

## Arthur Watson (1851–1922)

Arthur, who was nine when the family moved to Northampton in 1860, had spent his boyhood in Greensboro. In the next five years, he moved from Northampton to Germany, to France, returning to Northampton in 1865. He continued his education, begun in Greensboro, in German and French schools, and in the Northampton Collegiate Institute, where he prepared for college. He graduated from Yale in 1873 and then studied law in Northampton with Samuel Spaulding, a former law partner of Judge Forbes. From 1876 to the end of his life he engaged in the practice of law. He combined his profession with participation in civic affairs. A Democrat, as were all his family, he held the following public offices: Assessor (1885–86), Postmaster (1886–89), Alderman (1896), and Mayor (1901).

His primary interest was the Forbes Library. He served in 1891 on the Northampton Library Committee which supervised the Clark Library which was later merged with the Forbes Library. He became a member of the Board of Trustees of the latter in 1893 and was President of the Board from 1896 to his death in 1922. Among his many services to the Library was the selection of two of its noted librarians: Charles Cutter in 1894 and William Cutter in 1905. His interest in landscaping led him to order the planting in 1895 and 1897 of the pin oaks surrounding the library, which are now among the most beautiful trees in the city.

At Wildwood he became responsible for its management and development in which he had assisted his father. His chief avocation, revealed in his diary, was natural history. He observed and recorded the first arrival of birds and their time of nesting, the first appearance of wild flowers, the early call notes of toads and frogs, the freezing of the Connecticut and the thickness of the ice, and the dates and heights of the spring floods. For two full years he kept daily weather reports on government forms.

He was active in church and community affairs, and his home

*Arthur Watson*

continued to be a hospitable social center. With his aunt and sisters he entertained friends and relatives at teas, dinners, whist parties, and receptions, and he attended public functions in Northampton and neighboring communities. He was a member of the Northampton Men's Club and a charter member of the Men's Monday Evening Club. The latter consisted of men of the Smith College Faculty and of the City. He lived until 1922.

He inherited shares of his father's and Aunt's estates and bequeathed his estate to his sisters.

### Ella Watson (1853–1934)

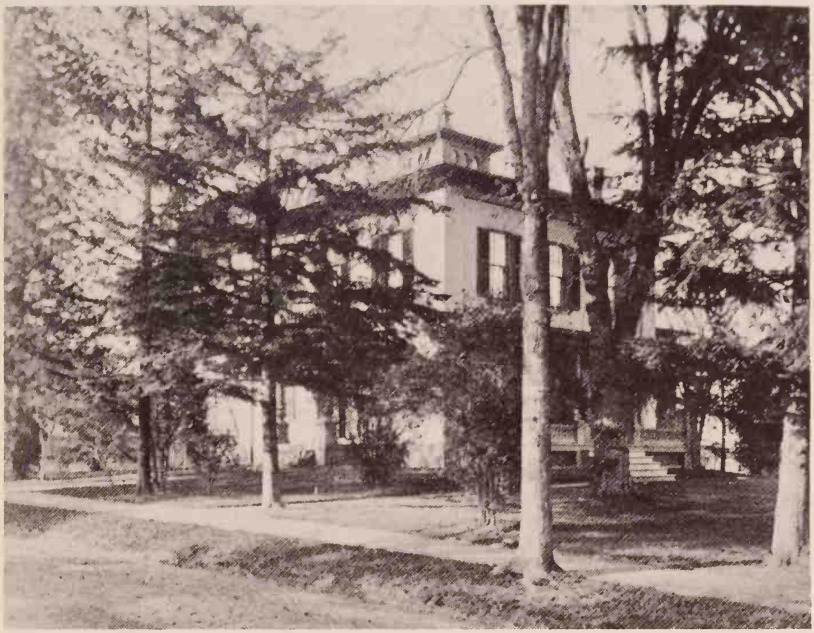
Ella, who was seven when the family moved from Greensboro in 1860, had spent a happy childhood at home and was friendly, observant, and interested in people and in surroundings. She had not attended school in the south. From 1860–65 she was taught by Aunt Harriet in Northampton, Heidelberg, and Caen, then attended Northampton public schools, graduating from the High School in 1872. At home she assisted in the household, helped entertain guests, and thoroughly enjoyed social life. She belonged to the Episcopal Church and to the club founded by Julia and served several years as its president.

Unlike Julia and Rosa, her interests were not centered in Northampton. She preferred to travel and spent parts of summers in Connecticut, Maine and Virginia, and several winters in Florida. She visited Europe often, sometimes for protracted periods.

She lived until 1934. She left bequests to Cecile and Francis and the rest of her estate to Rosa.

### Rosa Watson (1856–1938)

Rosa, the youngest sister, four years old when the family moved from Greensboro, was taught by Aunt Harriet until 1865. Then she attended public school in Northampton and graduated from the High School in 1874.



*2nd Watson home on Pomeroy Terrace*

She and Arthur were most congenial. Both were interested in family history and were successful gardeners. Rosa started the wild flower gardens still maintained at Childs Park, established the rose gardens now admired at the Northampton School for Girls, and planted trees, shrubs, and gardens at their third home at 55 Prospect Street.

Like her brother she was interested in politics, and throughout her long life was an active member of the Northampton Women's Democratic Club. Her community interests included the Episcopal Church, the Northampton Historical Society, and the Lathrop Home. Noted for her friendliness, hospitality, and generosity, she was especially beloved by her associates and friends. She acquired knowledge of finances from Arthur and became executor of his and her sisters' estates. She lived until 1938. Rosa inherited one-sixth of the estate of her father, one-eighth of that of Harriet, one-fourth of that of Arthur, the

major part of the estate of Ella, and the interest from Julia's Trust Fund. By her will she left the 55 Prospect Street home to Cecile and established a Trust Fund. Cecile and Francis received the interest. Provision was also made to grant Cecile part of the principal if needed by her. At the expiration of the Trust, Forbes Library inherited 87 per cent of the principal and other charities the remainder. These included 3 per cent to the Dickinson Hospital, District Nursing Association, the Lathrop Home, and the Greensboro Episcopal Church, and 1 per cent to the Greensboro Public Library.

### Walter Watson (1858–1936)

Walter, who was two years old when the family moved from Greensboro in 1860, was cared for and taught by Aunt Harriet from then until his return in 1865 from Europe to Northampton. He remained here until 1888. He attended local schools, graduated from the Yale Sheffield Scientific School in 1879 and received the degree of Master of Engineering at Yale in 1882. He then practiced as a civil engineer. In 1884 he married Gertrude Winthrop Sergeant of Northampton. Their one son, Harold, was born and died in 1888. Then they moved, because of their ill health, to Salem, Virginia. A daughter, Margaret, born in 1890 attended a private school in Northampton and visited her uncle and aunts. His wife lived until 1915, his daughter until 1926, and Walter until 1936.

### Cecile Watson (1881–1966)

Cecile, the daughter of Frederick and Mary Adelia Watson, was born and educated in Selma, Alabama. She became a librarian working mainly in Cincinnati and for a short time (1942–45) in the Forbes Library. She spent many summers in Northampton, inherited the 55 Prospect Street home, and lived there from 1941 to 1948. She was a member of the Historical Society and of the Monday Afternoon Club. Her special interest was the cultivation of gardens started by Rosa.

*3rd Watson home at 55 Prospect Street*

In 1948 ill health and the departure of her best friend, Professor Emily Shields, led her to move to Cincinnati to be near the widow of her brother Francis. Before leaving, she gave to the Forbes Library the Letter Book and Diary of Arthur and to the Historical Society letters, portraits, daguerrotypes and photographs of the family and of Wildwood. She sold the property on Prospect Street to Esther Carpenter and Myra M. Sampson. Household possessions, including those brought from Greensboro, were sold later.

From 1949 to 1966 she lived in a private nursing home in Louisville, Kentucky, where she received excellent care. She was a cultured, shy person well liked by all who knew her. She had received bequests from Aunt Harriet, Julia, Ella, and Rosa and was the final recipient of the income from the Trust Funds of Julia and Rosa.

## *The Watson Bequests to the Forbes Library*

Forbes Library inherited from Julia and Rosa Watson in 1966 the principal of two Trust Funds established by them. Their brother, Arthur Watson, whose chief interest was in this Library, was the President of its Board of Trustees for twenty-six years.

# Watson Family Genealogy

| *Names* | *Birthplace* | *Dates* |
|---|---|---|
| Robert Watson | London, Eng. | ? –1637 |
| Elizabeth | " " | ? ? |
| Robert | London, Eng. | ? –1689 |
| Mary Rockwell | Windsor, Conn. | ? – ? |
| Ebeneser Sr. | Windsor, Conn. | 1661–1747 |
| Abigail Kelsey | " " | 1694– ? |
| Ebeneser Jr. | East Windsor Hills | 1706–1792 |
| Annie Trumbull | " " " | 1714–1797 |
| John | East Windsor " | 1744–1824 |
| Anna Bliss | " " " | 1750–1827 |
| Henry Sr. | East Windsor " | 1781–1848 |
| Julia Reed | " " " | 1792–1879 |
| Henry Jr. | East Windsor " | 1810–1891 |
| Sophia Peck | Greensboro, Ala. | 1821–1860 |
| Frederick | Greensboro | 1846–1906 |
| Mary John | " | 1850–1941 |
| Henry | Selma, Ala. | 1879–1898 |
| Cecile | Selma | 1881–1966 |
| Francis | Selma | 1884–1943 |
| Mary Strine | Williamsport, Pa. | 1884– —— |
| Julia | Greensboro | 1848–1927 |
| Arthur | Greensboro | 1851–1922 |
| Ella | Greensboro | 1853–1934 |
| Rosa | Greensboro | 1956–1938 |
| Walter | Greensboro | 1858–1936 |
| Gertrude Sergeant | Northampton | 1856–1915 |
| Harold | Northampton | 1888–1888 |
| Margaret | Salem, Va. | 1890–1926 |
| Horace | Greensboro | 1858–1858 |
| Harriet | East Windsor Hills | 1833–1914 |

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NOTE: Letters, Photographs and Genealogical Information from Mrs. Francis Watson, Mrs. Robert Watson, Mrs. Katherine Sergeant White, and Mrs. Reuben Wright are gratefully acknowledged.